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AUTHOR	Long, Bonita C.
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ABSTRACT

Although employment can be an exciting challenge, it can also induce stress. This digest examines some of the characteristics of job-related stress. Three concepts characterize the association of work, mental health, and physical health. (1) Stress is an interaction between individuals and any source of environmental demand. (2) A stressor is an object or event that the individual perceives to be disruptive. (3) Appraisals of stress are determined by the values, goals, coping strategies and other factors employees bring to the situation. A balanced understanding of work stress recognizes that employment provides rewards that are both internal and external. Some factors, such as lack of control over work, the work place, and employment status, have been identified both as sources of stress and as critical health risks. Strategies for reducing work-related stress include making working conditions less stressful, helping individuals adapt by teaching them better coping strategies, and identifying the stressful relationship between the individual or group and the work setting. Employers should recognize that sources of stress may vary from worker to worker, and that providing a solution for one worker may create stress for another worker. (RJM)

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by Bonita C. Long

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON Counseling And Student Services

ERIC DIGEST

1995 EDO-CG-95-81

Stress in the Work Place

Bonita C. Long, Ph.D.

Overview

Work plays a powerful role in people's lives and exerts an important influence on their well-being. Since the 1960s, paid work has occupied an increasing proportion of most people's lives. Although employment can be an exciting challenge for many individuals, it can also be a tremendous source of stress. Consequently, as work makes more and more demands on time and energy, individuals are increasingly exposed to both the positive and negative aspects of employment. The relationship between work and mental and physical health may also influence career adjustment as well as to the productivity and economic viability of companies. Three concepts are important to understanding this relationship:

- *Stress* is an interaction between individuals and any source of demand (stressor) within their environment.
- A *stressor* is the object or event that the individual perceives to be disruptive. Stress results from the perception that the demands exceed one's capacity to cope. The interpretation or appraisal of stress is considered an intermediate step in the relationship between a given stressor and the individual's response to it.
- *Appraisals* are determined by the values, goals, individual commitment, personal resources (e.g., income, family, self-esteem), and coping strategies that employees bring to the situation.

Newspaper headlines worldwide have heralded an unprecedented concern about the detrimental effects of work stress. The United Nations World Labor Report attributes the source of stress to work places that are unstable, impersonal, and hostile. Since the early 1960s, researchers have been examining the psychosocial and physical demands of the work environment that trigger stress. Research has identified many organizational factors contributing to increased stress levels: (a) job insecurity; (b) shift work; (c) long work hours; (d) role conflict; (e) physical hazard exposures; and (f) interpersonal conflicts with coworkers or supervisors.

Reciprocally, elevated stress levels in an organization are associated with increased turnover, absenteeism, sickness, reduced productivity, and low morale.

At a personal level, work stressors are related to depression, anxiety, general mental distress symptoms, heart disease, ulcers, and chronic pain (Sauter, Hurrell, & Cooper, 1989). In addition, many people are distressed by efforts to juggle work and family demands, such as caring for sick or aging parents or children (Wiersma & Berg, 1991). Therefore, any exploration of the relationship between work conditions and mental distress must take into account individual factors such as sex, age, race, income, education, marital and parental status, personality, and ways of coping.

To have a balanced approach to understanding work stress, it is necessary to recognize that employment provides rewards that are both internal (intrinsic) and external(extrinsic) (Locke & Taylor, 1990), (e.g., skill development, self-esteem, money, variety from domestic surroundings, social contacts, and personal identity). Although increasing the rewards of work can offset its stressful aspects, the physical environment and the psychosocial conditions of employment can have deleterious effects on workers' mental and physical well-being.

Job Control

Lack of control over work, the work place, and employment status have been identified both as sources of stress and as a critical health risk for some workers. Employees who are unable to exert control over their lives at work are more likely to experience work stress and are, therefore,more likely to have impaired health (see Sutton & Kahn, 1984, for a review, and Sauter et al., 1989). Many studies have found that heavy job demand, and low control or decreased decision latitude, lead to job dissatisfaction, mental strain, and cardiovascular disease.

In general, job control is the ability to exert influence over one's environment so that the environment becomes more rewarding and less threatening. Individuals who have job control have the ability to influence the planning and execution of work tasks. Research has found that it is the *influence* resulting from participation, rather than participation *per se*, which affects job stress and health (Israel, House, Schurman, Heaney, & Mero, 1989). For example, Jackson (1983) found that participation (attendance at staff meetings) had a negative effect on perceived job stress, and a positive effect on perceived influence. This, in turn, influenced emotional strain, job satisfaction, ab-

senteeism, and turnover intention. Similarly, Israel et al., (1989) concluded that the ability to control or influence work factors (e.g., speed and pacing of production) is linked to incidences of cardiovascular disease as well as to psychosomatic disorders, job dissatisfaction, and depression.

Interventions

Lazarus (1991) has identified three main strategies for reducing work-related stress.

1. Alter the working conditions so that they are less stressful or more conducive to effective coping. This strategy is most appropriate for large numbers of workers working under severe conditions. Examples include altering physical annoyances such as noise levels, or changing organizational decision-making processes to include employees.

2. Help individuals adapt by teaching them better coping strategies for conditions that are impossible or difficult to change. A limitation to this strategy is that it is costly to deal with each individual's unique transaction with the environment. Intervention strategies could include individual counseling services for employees, Employee Assistance Programs, or specialized stress management programs, such as cognitive behavioral interventions (Long, 1988).

3. Identify the stressful relationship between the individual or group and the work setting. Intervention strategies might include changes in worker assignment to produce a better person-environment fit, or it could involve teaching coping strategies for individuals who share common coping deficits (e.g., training in relaxation skills).

Conclusion

Individuals vary greatly in their capacity to endure stressful situations, and there is, undoubtedly, self-selection in the kinds of jobs and stressors that individuals choose. Because sources of stress may vary from worker to worker, providing a solution for one worker may create stress for another worker. For example, if the organization provides more opportunity for influence over the work process, the change in control may be experienced positively by some but negatively by others. A partial solution to this problem (Lazarus, 1991) may involve intervening with groups of workers that are formed based on person-environment relationships, and which contribute to the generation or reduction of stress.

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Bonita C. Long is a professor in the Department of Counselling Psychology, Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC.

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